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(54) **COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AUTONOMOUS VEHICLE AND EXTERNAL OBSERVERS**

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B60Q 1/50 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC . ***B60Q 1/26*** (2013.01); ***B60Q 1/50*** (2013.01); *B60Q 2400/50* (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
None
See application file for complete search history.

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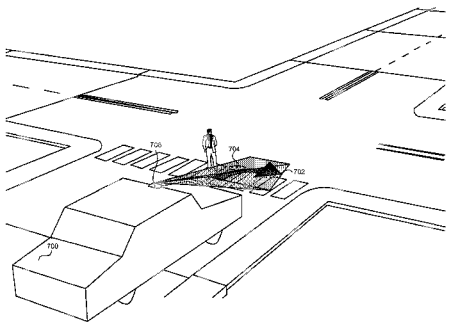
(57) **ABSTRACT**

At least one embodiment of this disclosure includes a method for an autonomous vehicle (e.g., a fully autonomous or semi-autonomous vehicle) to communicate with external observers. The method includes: receiving a task at the autonomous vehicle; collecting data that characterizes a surrounding environment of the autonomous vehicle from a sensor coupled to the autonomous vehicle; determining an intended course of action for the autonomous vehicle to undertake based on the task and the collected data; and conveying a human understandable output via an output device, the human understandable output expressly or implicitly indicating the intended course of action to an external observer.

37 Claims, 13 Drawing Sheets



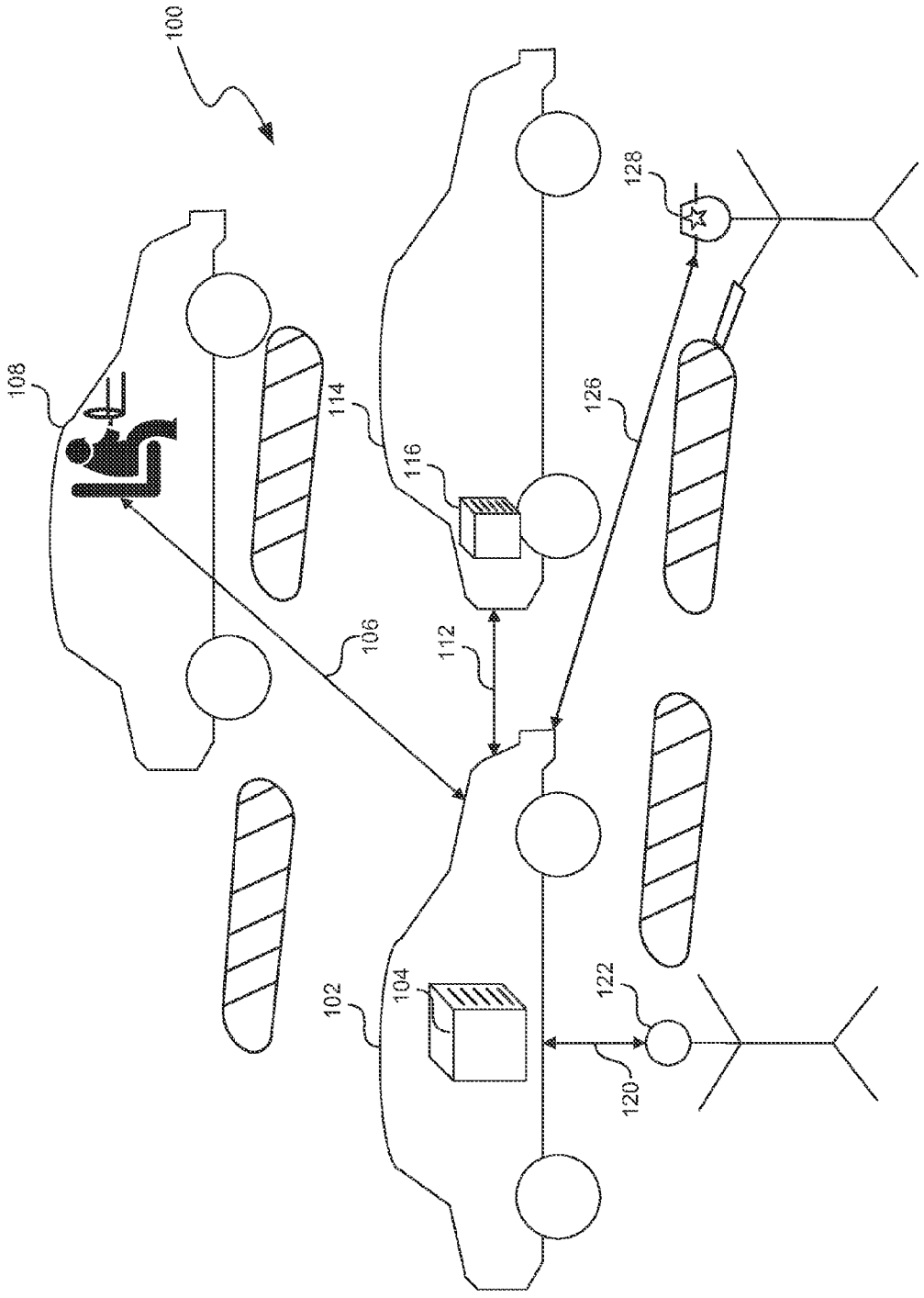


FIG. 1

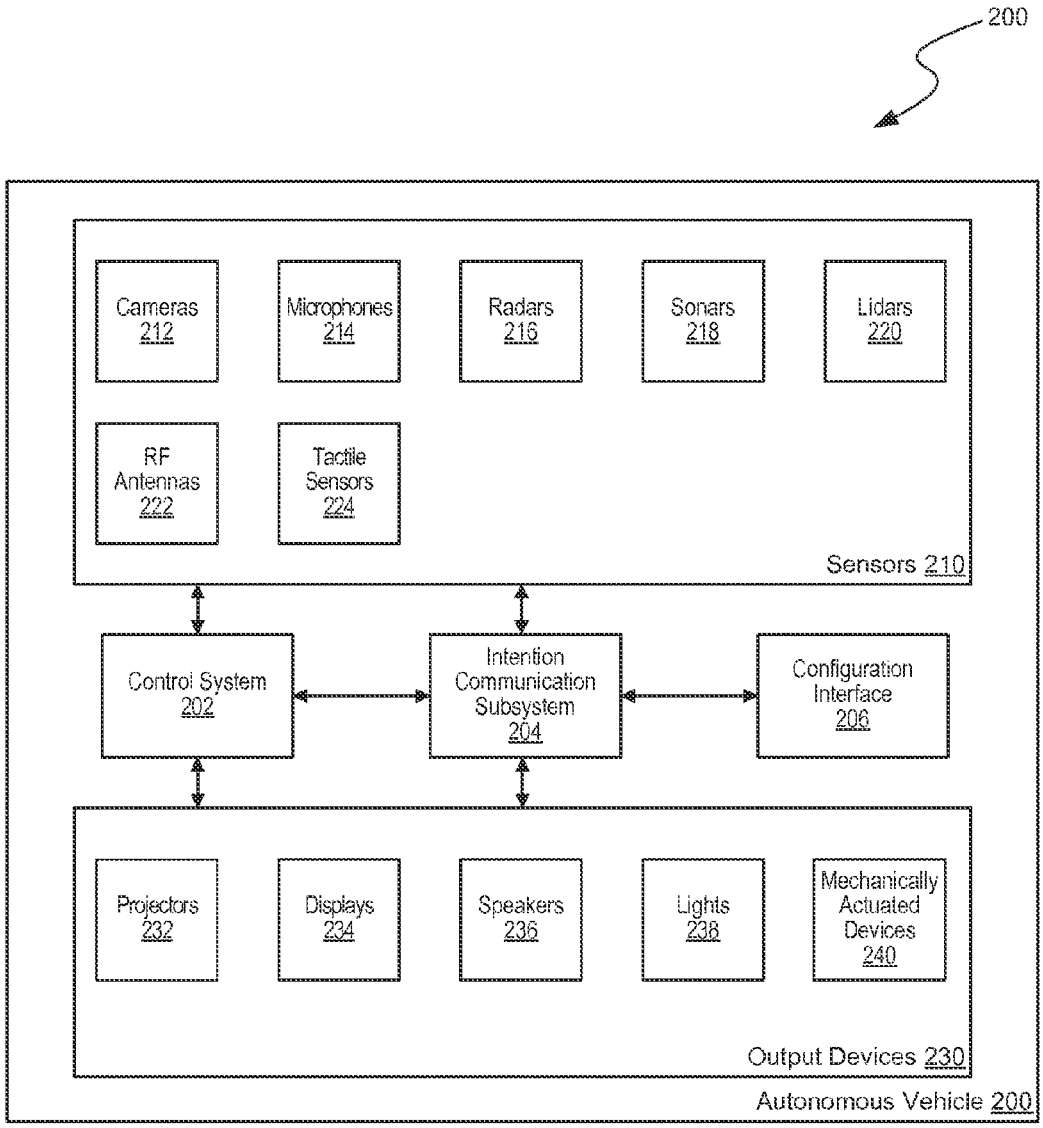

200
Cameras 212
Microphones 214
Radars 216
Sonars 218
Lidars 220
RF Antennas 222
Tactile Sensors 224
Sensors 210
Control System 202
Intention Communication Subsystem 204
Configuration Interface 206
Projectors 232
Displays 234
Speakers 236
Lights 238
Mechanically Actuated Devices 240
Output Devices 230
Autonomous Vehicle 200

FIG. 2

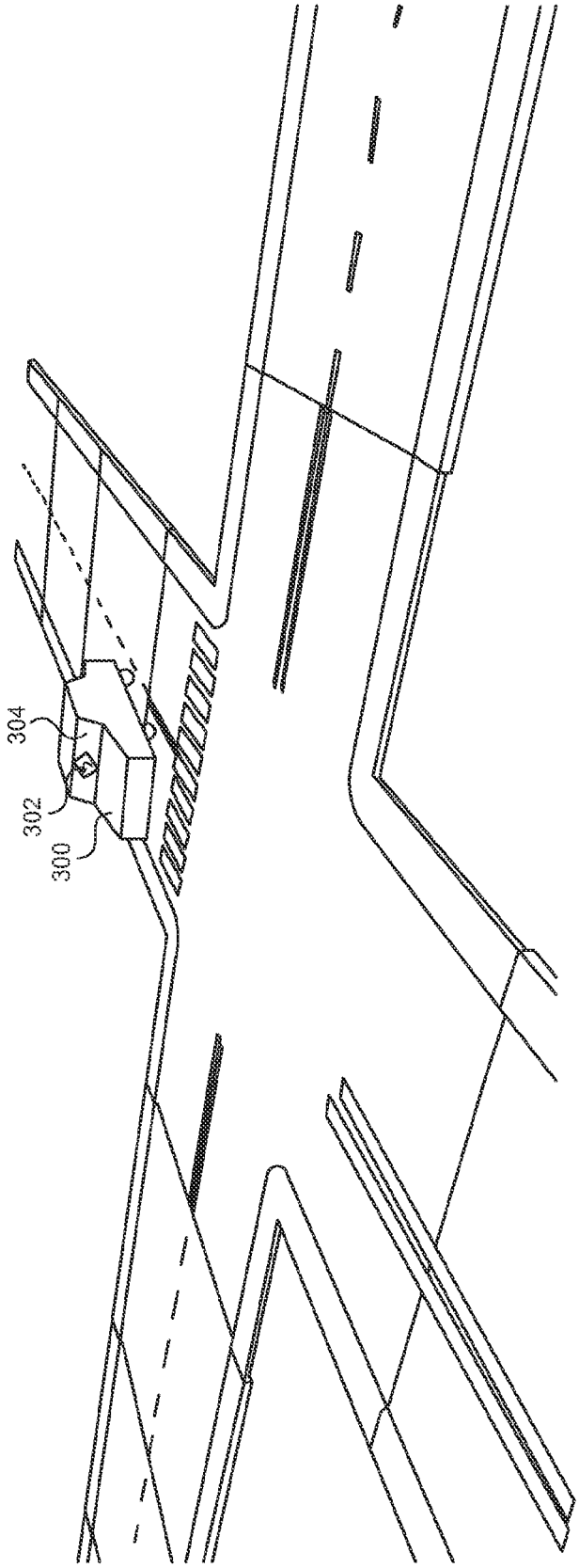


FIG. 3

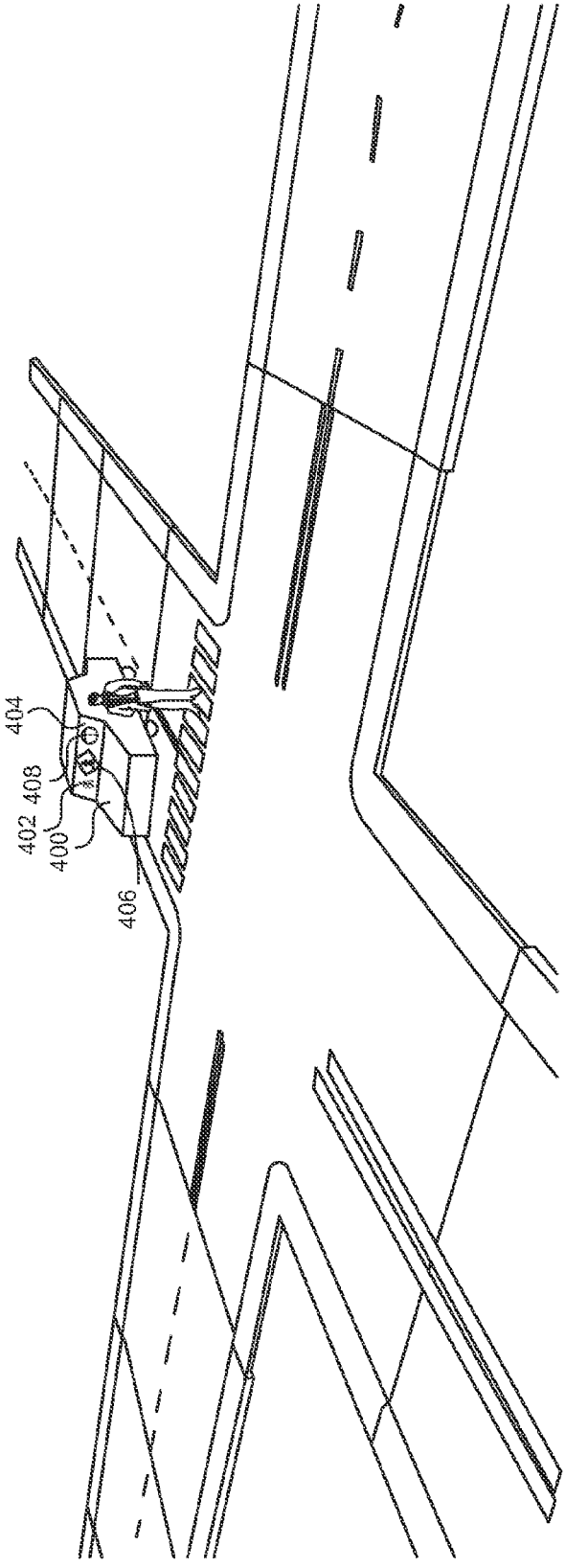


FIG. 4

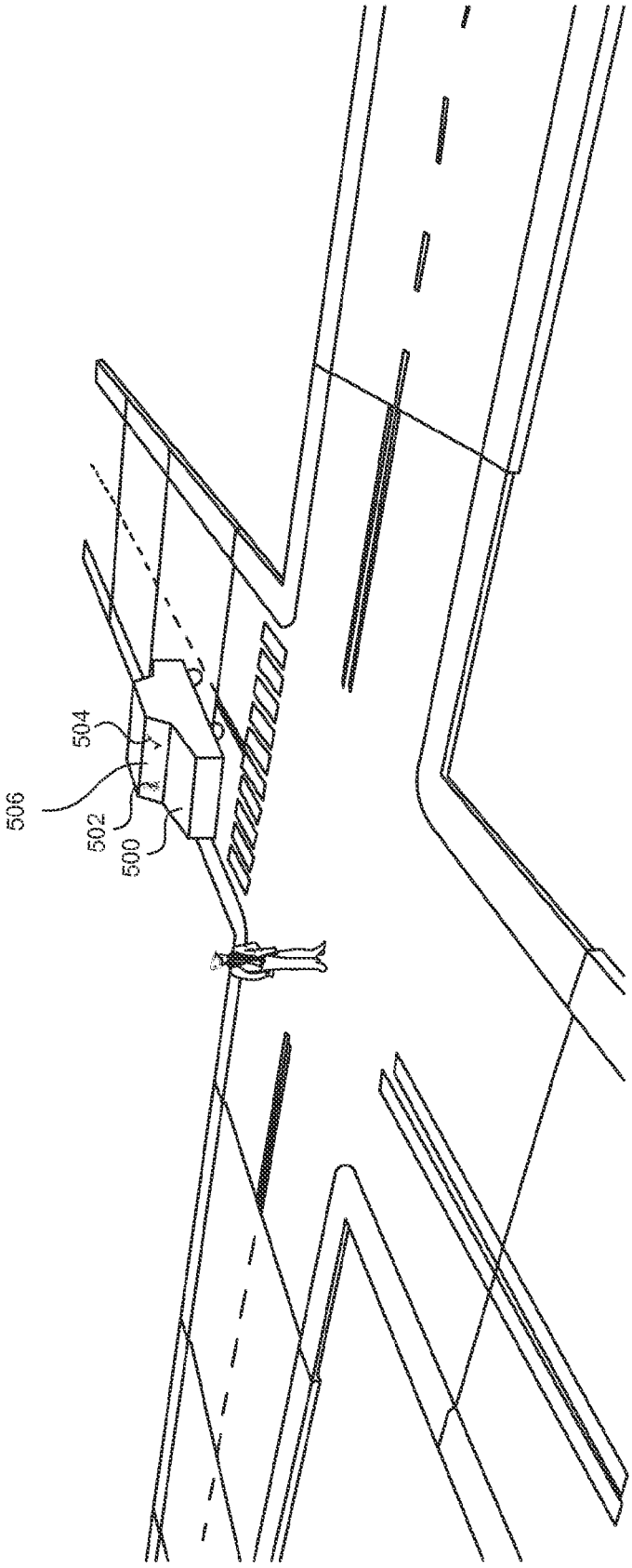


FIG. 5

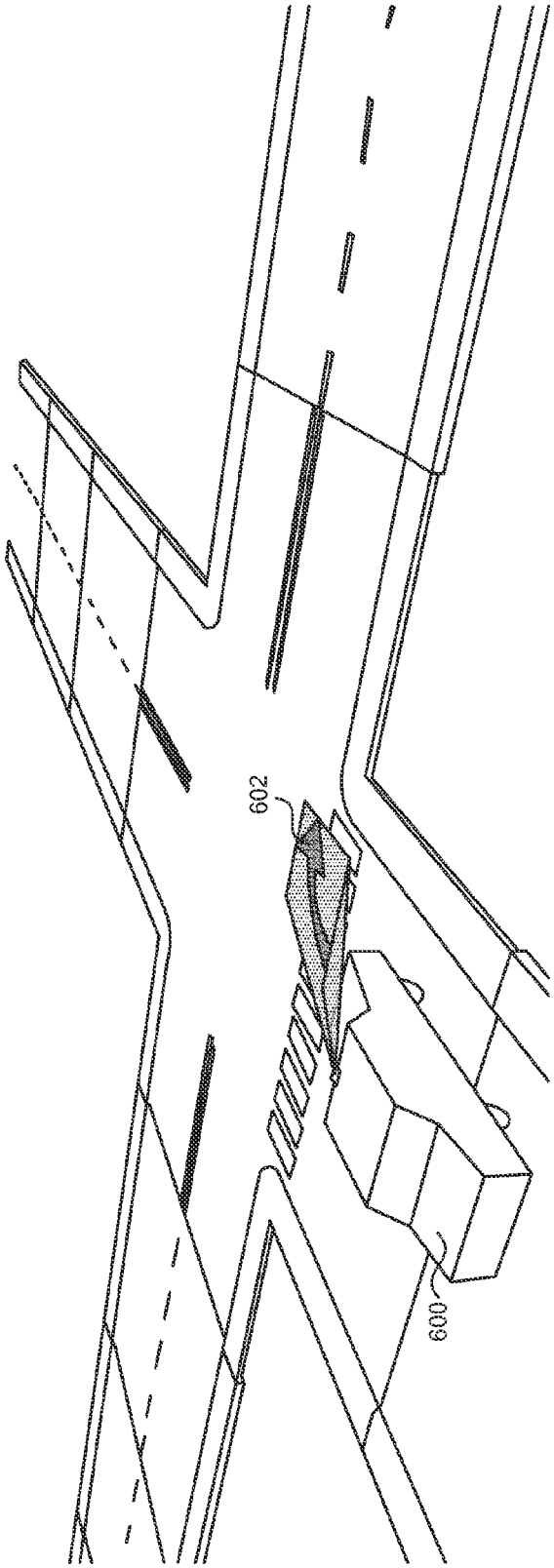


FIG. 6A

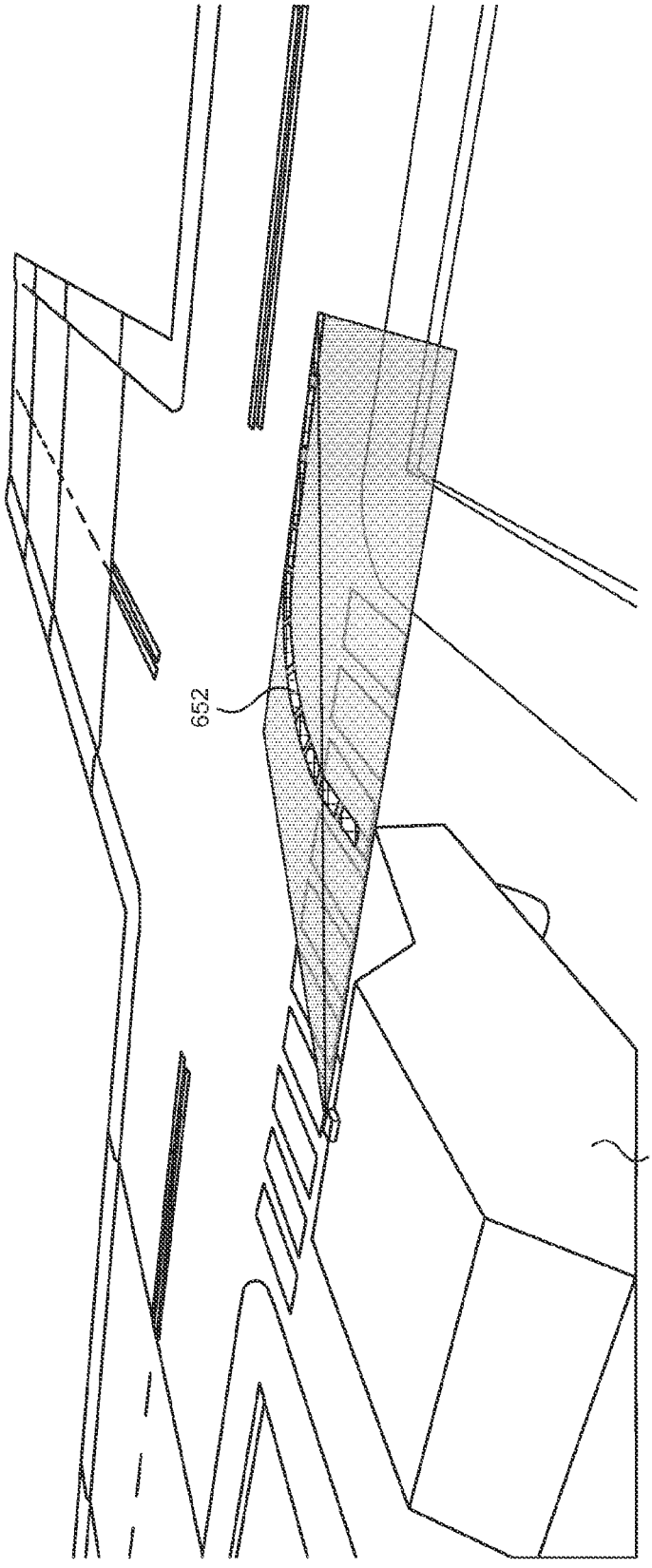


FIG. 6B

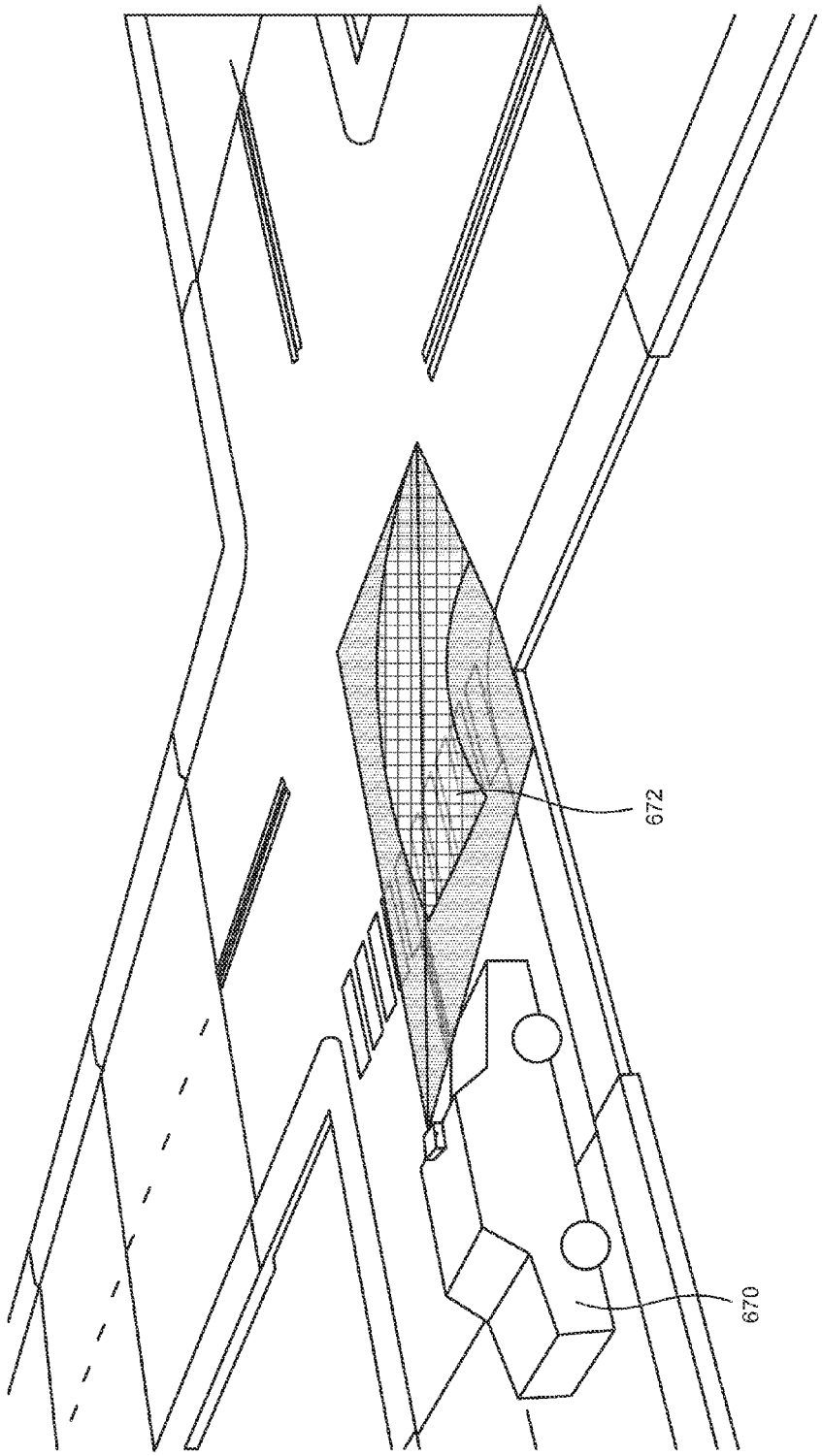


FIG. 6C

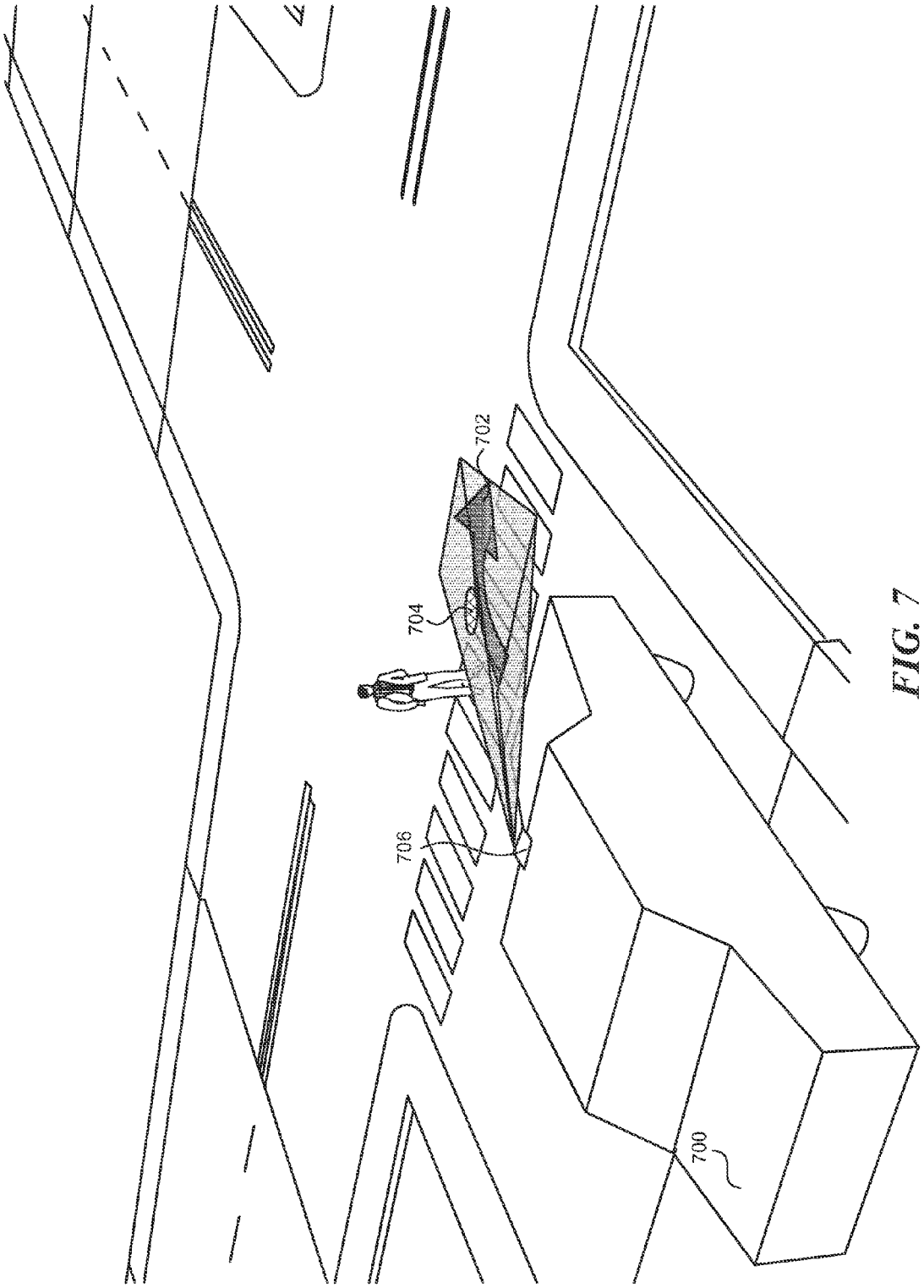


FIG. 7

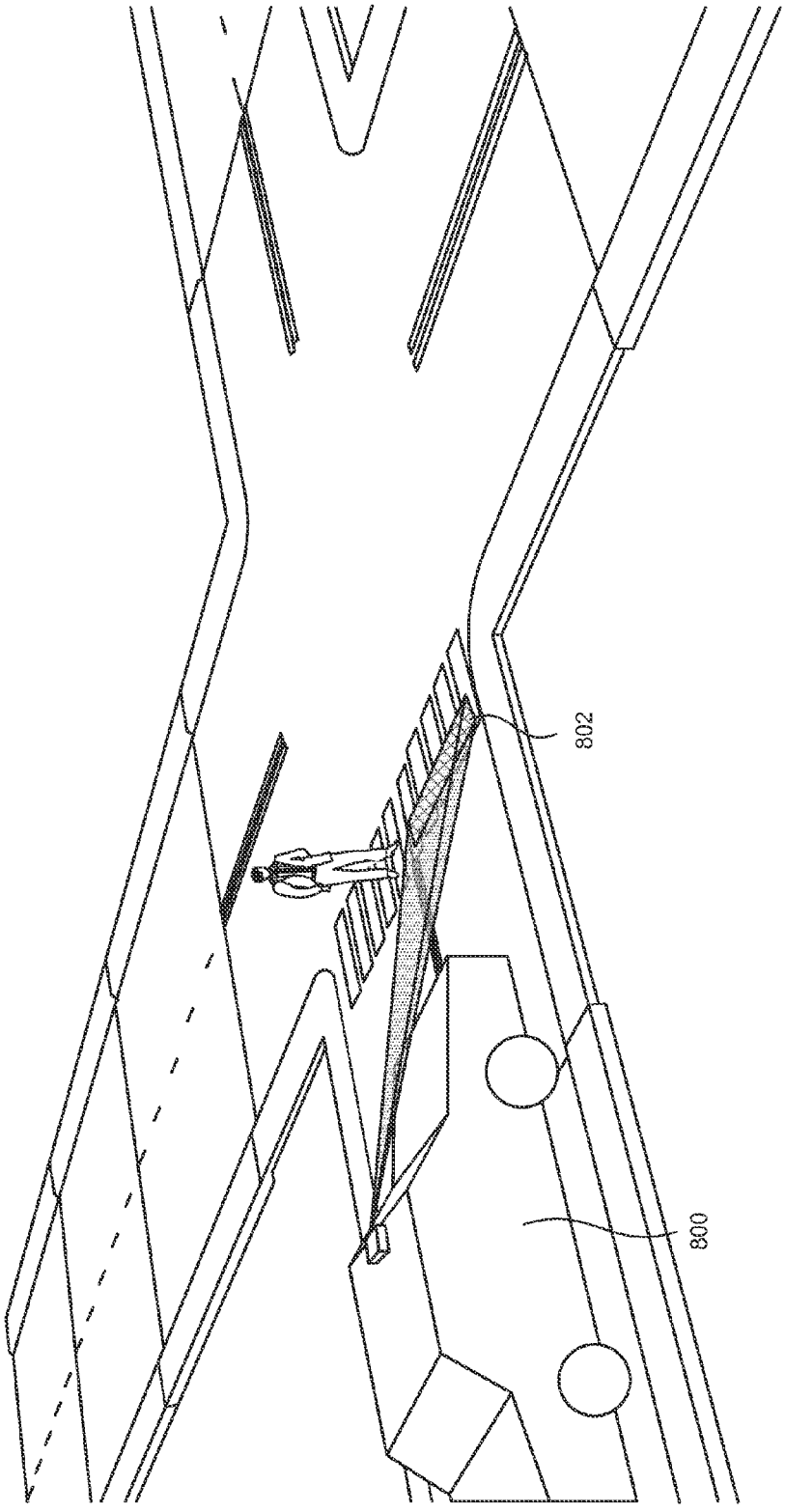


FIG. 8

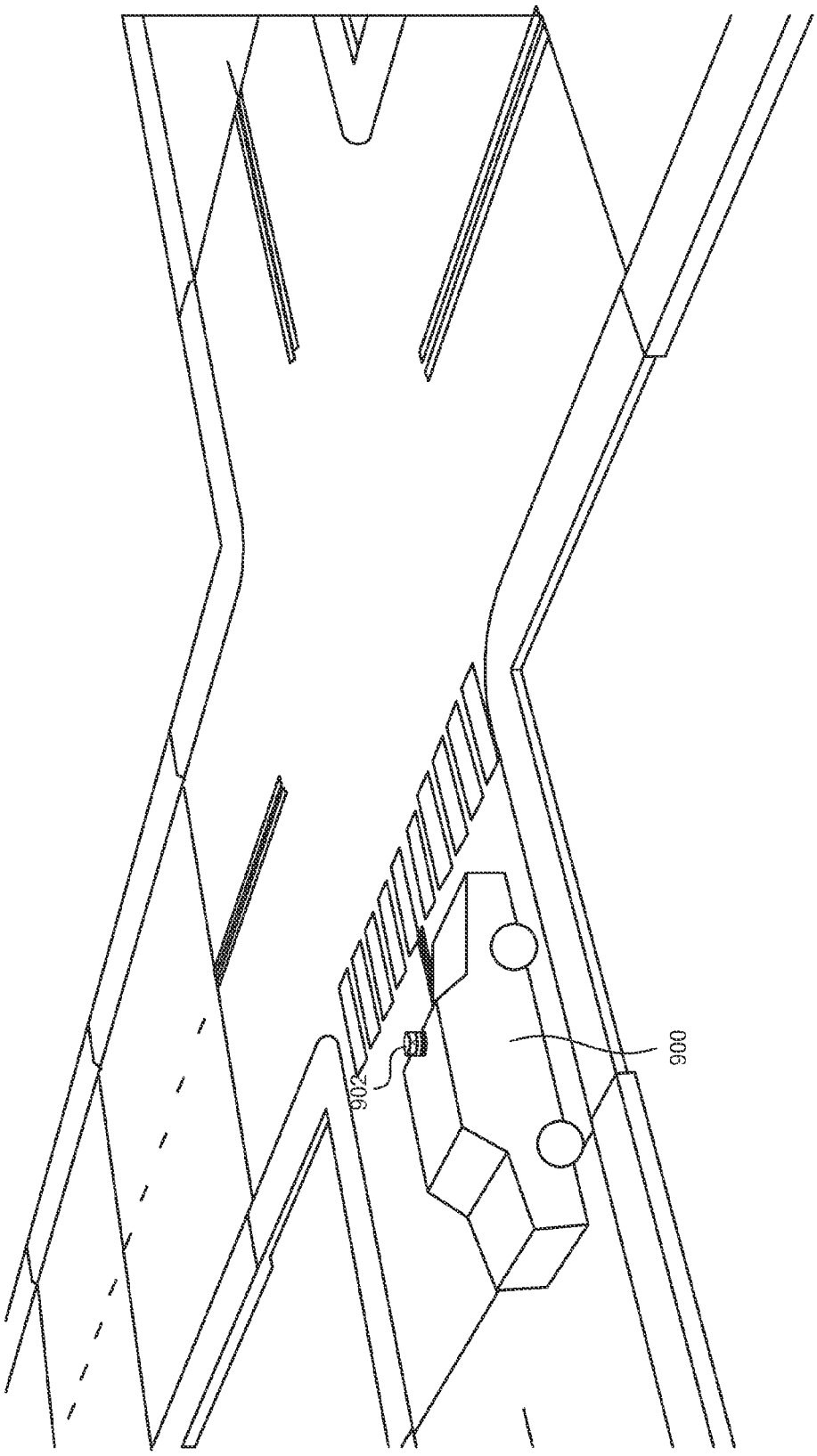


FIG. 9

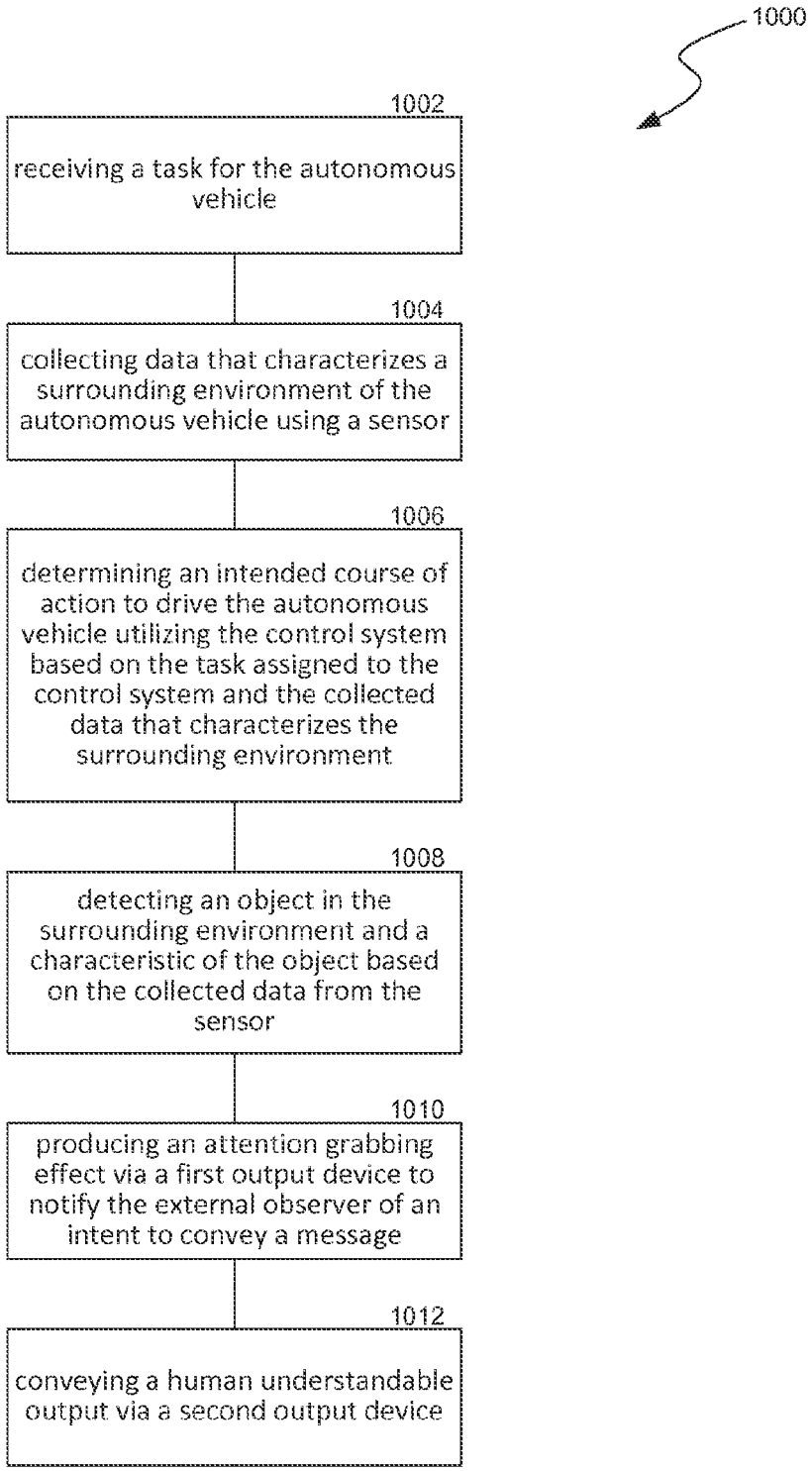

1000
1002
receiving a task for the autonomous vehicle
1004
collecting data that characterizes a surrounding environment of the autonomous vehicle using a sensor
1006
determining an intended course of action to drive the autonomous vehicle utilizing the control system based on the task assigned to the control system and the collected data that characterizes the surrounding environment
1008
detecting an object in the surrounding environment and a characteristic of the object based on the collected data from the sensor
1010
producing an attention grabbing effect via a first output device to notify the external observer of an intent to convey a message
1012
conveying a human understandable output via a second output device

FIG. 10

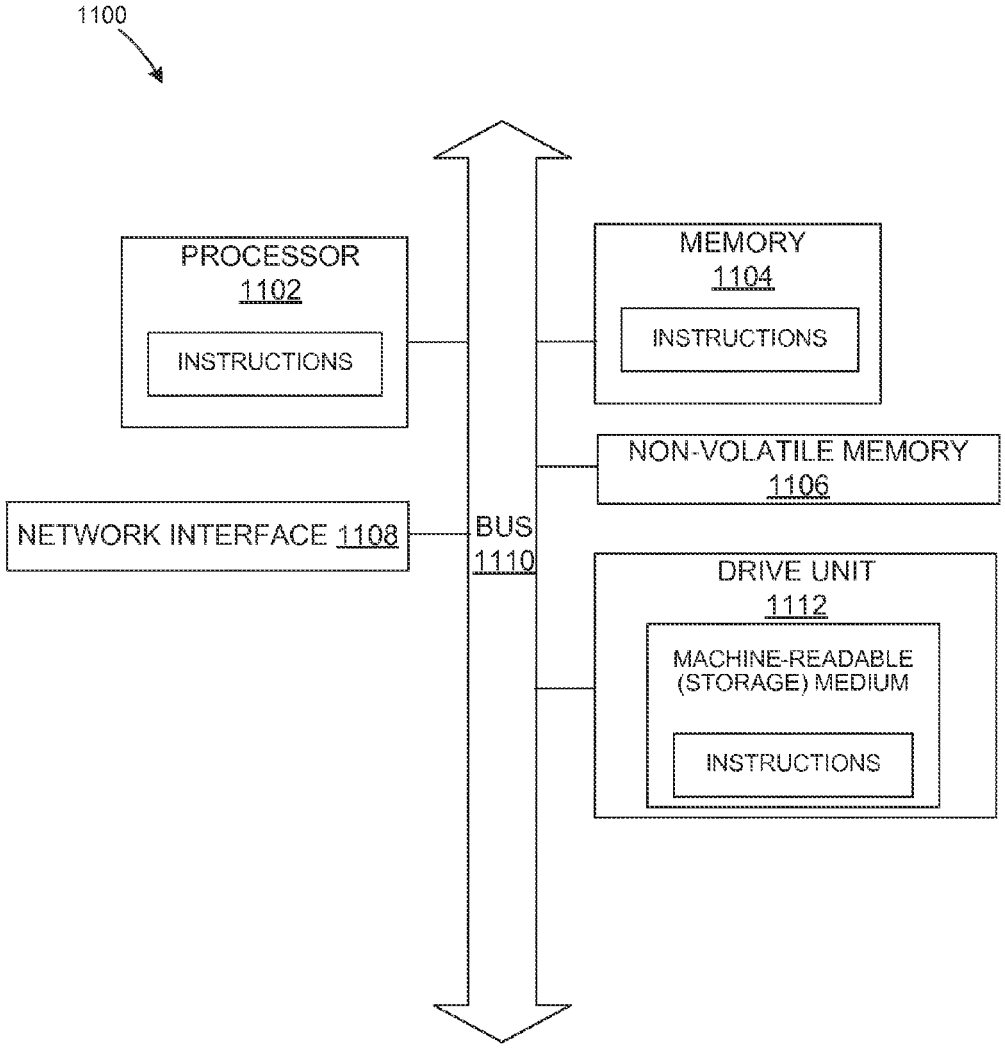

1100
PROCESSOR
1102
INSTRUCTIONS
MEMORY
1104
INSTRUCTIONS
NON-VOLATILE MEMORY
1106
NETWORK INTERFACE 1108
BUS
1110
DRIVE UNIT
1112
MACHINE-READABLE
(STORAGE) MEDIUM
INSTRUCTIONS

FIG. 11

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AUTONOMOUS VEHICLE AND EXTERNAL OBSERVERS

RELATED FIELD

The disclosure relates to autonomous vehicles and in particular to communications between autonomous vehicles and humans.

BACKGROUND

Operating a vehicle (e.g., a car, a truck, or a bike) is a challenging task because a driver has to learn to operate the vehicle, navigate within the limitations of traffic laws and the physical environment, and communicate with other proximate drivers in that same physical environment (e.g., a road, a parking lot, etc.). Regarding the last requirement, human drivers signal their intentions through a number of intentional and subconscious acts. Some of these signals rely on devices, which are purposely built into the vehicle, such as turn signals and brake lights. Other signals rely on innate human characteristics. These characteristics include intentional actions, such as waving a hand to signal another driver to proceed through an intersection and subconscious or reactive actions, such as a driver turning his head before merging lanes. When all other forms of signaling have failed, human drivers are usually able to speak their intentions or ask for assistance, such as when a vehicle breaks down or when a driver becomes lost.

The signals conveyed are perceived by external observers, such as pedestrians, other drivers, or traffic control officers. The external observers are able to interpret these signals to gain insight into a driver's intentions. These insights are important to enable safe and efficient flow of vehicular traffic as well as for providing assistance when needed. A central feature of ail of these methods is that an external observer need not employ any special equipment to understand the signal conveyed and most signals do not require any training to discern.

Advances in autonomous vehicles enable computers or other electronic devices to drive vehicles. At least two types of autonomous vehicles exist today—fully autonomous vehicles with no human passengers and semi-autonomous vehicles that are capable of operating in an autonomous mode while carrying human passengers. As the number of autonomous vehicles increases, there will be a need for better communication methods between the autonomous vehicles and external observers. Unfortunately, the signaling methods that are currently built into vehicles, such as turn signals and brake lights, only provide the ability to communicate a small subset of the information which is required. The signal and brake lights provide a limited ability to communicate with external observers. No known current autonomous vehicle provides a comprehensive means for signaling external observers.

DISCLOSURE OVERVIEW

Broadly speaking, the embodiments disclosed herein describe a number of designs and methods that enable autonomous vehicles to convey navigation-related intentions to external observers. In one aspect, this disclosure describes various ways of conveying information to external observers using images displayed on the vehicle. These images may be symbols, words, or pictures. In another aspect, the disclosure describes various ways of notifying external observers of the vehicle's intention to convey information. This notification may be accomplished using lights or sounds.

The disclosure also describes various ways of conveying information to external observers using images projected on the ground in proximity to the vehicle. These projections may include information concerning the intended trajectory of the vehicle as well as the anti-trajectory (i.e., an area where the vehicle specifically will not travel).

Additionally, the disclosure describes various ways of conveying information to external observers using an anthropomorphic device. The anthropomorphic device may be a purpose built object or it may be incorporated as part of a sensor pack already installed on the vehicle. The anthropomorphic device may also be in the form of an image. Finally, the disclosure describes various ways of conveying information to external observers using a movement state indicator (e.g., a three-state indicator).

This Disclosure Overview is provided to introduce a selection of concepts in a simplified form that are further described below in the Detailed Description. This Summary is not intended to identify key features or essential features of the claimed subject matter, nor is it intended to be used to limit the scope of the claimed subject matter. A more extensive presentation of features, details, utilities, and advantages of the disclosure is provided in the following written description of various embodiments, illustrated in the accompanying drawings, and defined in the appended claims. Some embodiments of this disclosure have other aspects, elements, features, and steps in addition to or in place of what is described above. These potential additions and replacements are described throughout the rest of the specification.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a navigational environment of a vehicle capable of indicating its navigational intentions to an external observer, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **2** is an example of an autonomous vehicle in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **3** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle displaying a standard traffic symbol, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **4** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle displaying an image of a nearby pedestrian in a cross walk, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **5** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle displaying an image of a traffic officer and a symbol indicating acknowledging a command from the traffic officer, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **6**A is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using an arrow symbol, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **6**B is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using a dash line, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **6**C is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using a pattern indicating areas that the autonomous vehicle will cover, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **7** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using an arrow symbol and showing an oval to indicate an

obstacle along the upcoming trajectory that the autonomous vehicle is aware of, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **8** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle projecting an image of a bar indicating a border beyond which the autonomous vehicle would not traverse, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **9** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle with a movement state indicator to convey a human readable output corresponding to an intended course of action, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **10** is a flow chart of a method of operating an autonomous vehicle to convey an intended course of action to an external observer, in accordance with various embodiments.

FIG. **11** is a block schematic diagram that depicts a machine in the exemplary form of a computer system, within which a set of instructions for causing the machine to perform any of the herein disclosed methodologies may be executed.

The figures depict various embodiments of this disclosure for purposes of illustration only. One skilled in the art will readily recognize from the following discussion that alternative embodiments of the structures and methods illustrated herein may be employed without departing from the principles of the invention described herein.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. **1** is a navigational environment **100** of a vehicle **102** capable of indicating its navigational intentions to an external observer, in accordance with various embodiments. Present day autonomous vehicles provide little, if any, notification of their intentions in a discernible form to an external observer. This makes it challenging for people or systems near such autonomous vehicle to plan its behavior or react to the behaviors of the autonomous vehicle. The disclosed autonomous vehicle, such as the vehicle **102**, solves the above challenge by conveying the intentions of the vehicle **102** in a variety of human understandable forms, using light or sound.

The vehicle **102** can be an autonomous vehicle (e.g., a fully autonomous or a semi-autonomous vehicle) that has an assigned task. The vehicle **102** includes a first control system **104**, which can be implemented by a computing device, such as a computer, a field programmable gate array (FPGA), an application specific integrated circuit (ASIC), or other electronic devices or systems. The task can be a navigation-related job, in that it requires the vehicle to navigate in some manner, which the vehicle **102** attempts to complete. For example, the task may require that the vehicle **102** navigate from a starting point to an ending point (e.g., a destination address). The ending point may be open ended, in that it may be changed or amended over time. The task may also require the vehicle **102** to pass a number of way-points along the way or to follow a predefined route. The vehicle **102** is equipped with various sensors that gather data concerning the vehicle's surroundings. Based on this data and its assigned task, the vehicle plans an intended course of action which it conveys to external observers in a human understandable form.

FIG. **1** illustrates some of the potential forms of communication that the vehicle **102** is capable of utilizing to convey its intentions to the external observers. In one example, the communication can take the form of human driver communication **106**, which involves the first control system **104** of the vehicle **102** and a human driver **108**. The human driver communication **106** can be a light (e.g., a beam, a flash, other radiating shapes), a sound, a display, an animation, or any combination thereof. The human driver communication **106** can be generated from an output device of the vehicle **102** that is not a conventional signal light or brake light.

Another example, the communication can fake the form of inter-device communication **112**, which involves the first control system **104** and a second control system **116** of another vehicle **114** (e.g., another autonomous vehicle). For example, this type of communication can involve wireless digital or analog communication. For another example, the inter-device communication **112** can be steganographic communication with digital information encoded into a human understandable presentation (e.g., an image or a sound). The inter-device communication **112** can also be other optical based, radio frequency based, or acoustic-based communication with encoded information.

In yet another example, the communication can take the form of pedestrian communication **120**, which involves the first control system **104** and a pedestrian **122**. The pedestrian **122** can be any external observer who is not driving a vehicle. In a further example, the communication can take the form of traffic controller communication **126**, which involves the first control system **104** and a traffic controller **128**. The traffic controller **128** can be a person with the authority to control traffic (e.g., a road worker, a police officer, etc.), a traffic control device, or an agent terminal device within the navigational environment **100** for a remote person to control the traffic. The pedestrian communication **120** and the traffic controller communication **126** can take the forms similar to the human driver communication **106**, including a light, a sound, a display, an animation, or any combination thereof. In some embodiments, the first control system **104** can simultaneously present or generate any of the human driver communication **106**, the inter-device communication **112**, the pedestrian communication **120**, and the traffic controller communication **126**.

FIG. **2** is an example of an autonomous vehicle **200** in accordance with various embodiments. The autonomous vehicle **200** may be a fully autonomous vehicle or a semi-autonomous vehicle. The autonomous vehicle **200** includes a control system **202** (e.g., including the first control system **104** of FIG. **1**). The control system **202** determines (e.g., calculates and plans) a trajectory for the autonomous vehicle **200** and execute the trajectory in accordance with the traffic laws and physical limitations of its surrounding environment, such as the navigational environment **100** of FIG. **1**. The autonomous vehicle **200** further includes an intention communication subsystem **204**. In some embodiments, the intention communication subsystem **204** is physically integrated with the control system **202**. In other embodiments, the intention communication subsystem **204** is a separate device coupled to the control system **202**, via a wire or wirelessly. In some embodiments, the control system **202** and/or the intention communication subsystem **204** can be detachable from the autonomous vehicle **200** and/or can be portable.

The intention communication subsystem **204** is able to generate a human understandable output to convey an intended course of action (e.g., the trajectory) of the autonomous vehicle **200**. The intended course of action can be explicitly illustrated or implicitly illustrated (e.g., by acknowledging a traffic law, an obstacle, or a physical border beyond which the autonomous vehicle **200** will not traverse). For example, the control system **202** can determine the intended course of action based on one or more user configurations (e.g., by setting a destination) through a

configuration interface **206**. The control system **202** can also take into account the surrounding environment of the autonomous vehicle **200** based on sensor inputs from one or more sensors **210**. Based on the sensor inputs and the user configurations, the control system **202** is then able to determine the trajectory and route to be taken by the autonomous vehicle **200** and any additional actions needed to navigate to the destination (e.g., avoiding obstacles, avoiding violations of traffic law, reach intermediary waypoints, etc.).

The sensors **210** can include one or more cameras **212**, one or more microphones **214**, one or more radars **216**, one or more sonars **218**, one or more lidars **220**, one or more radio frequency (RF) antennas **222** (as a sensor and/or a transceiver for machine readable communication), one or more tactile sensors **224**, other types of passive or active sensors, or any combination thereof. The tactile sensors **224** can detect contact between an external object (e.g., a person or an object) and the autonomous vehicle **200**. For example, the tactile sensors **224** can be force sensors, accelerometers, or touchscreen sensors. The sensors **210** collect data describing the surrounding environment of the autonomous vehicle **200** and/or providing self-diagnosis feedback of the autonomous vehicle **200** (e.g., relative to the surrounding environment). The control system **202** can also record metadata from the sensors **210** for further analysis. For example, such analysis includes the control system **202** detecting various events, conditions, and objects through the collected data, including detecting traffic events, accidents, pedestrians, fellow drivers, fellow vehicles, active or passive traffic signs, road conditions, weather conditions, or any combination thereof. The control system **202** can further detect characteristics of such events or objects, including types of fellow vehicles, relative locations of the detected objects, anticipated behaviors of the detected objects, locations of sensors of detected devices, locations of perceptive organs (e.g., eyes or ears) of detected people, or any combination thereof.

The intention communication subsystem **204** expresses and conveys the human understandable outputs through one or more output devices **230**. The output devices **230** includes one or more projectors **232**, one or more display devices **234**, one or more speakers **236**, one or more lights **238**, one or more mechanically actuated devices **240**, or any combination thereof. The output devices **230** can be unidirectional, bidirectional, multidirectional, or omnidirectional.

When conveying a human understandable output using the output devices **230**, the intention communication subsystem **204** can direct the one or more of the output devices **230** at a detected external observer or an area that the detected external observer can perceive. In various embodiments, the intention communication subsystem **204** can present the detected objects (e.g., detected based on the sensor data) in the human understandable output to acknowledge the control system **202**'s awareness of the obstacle.

A user of the autonomous vehicle **200** can further configure the human understandable output, such as the form of the output, through the configuration interface **206**. For example, the user can choose the best form of communication to express and convey an intended course of action as determined by the control system **202**. The configuration interface **206** can present two or more options for conveying the intended course of action through the output devices **230**. For example, below are several examples of human understandable outputs that can be used to expressly or implicitly indicate the intended course of action of the autonomous vehicle **200**.

Display on Vehicle

The human understandable output can be conveyed using a number of different display formats via the display devices **234**. The display devices **234** can be a surface display or other displays mounted on the autonomous vehicle **200**. The display devices **234** can be retrofitted and detachably coupled to the autonomous vehicle **200**. In one format, the intentions of the control system **202** can be conveyed using images. The intention communication subsystem **204** can select these images from a list of standardized transportation or traffic symbols. These symbols can be displayed on the autonomous vehicle **200**'s windshield or other surface. When no such standardized symbol exists for conveying the necessary information, words can be displayed instead. For example, FIG. **3** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **300**, such as the autonomous vehicle **200**, displaying a standard traffic symbol **302** on a display **304** visible through a windshield of the autonomous vehicle **300**, in accordance with various embodiments.

In another format, the image displayed can also be a photo of a nearby obstacle or observer. For example, if the autonomous vehicle **200** approaches a cross walk, the intention communication subsystem **204** can display a photo of a pedestrian in the cross walk next to a green light. This conveys that the autonomous vehicle **200** has recognized the presence of the pedestrian, and that the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to yield to the pedestrian. For example, FIG. **4** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **400**, such as the autonomous vehicle **200**, displaying an image **402** of a nearby pedestrian in a cross walk, in accordance with various embodiments. The autonomous vehicle **400** includes a display **404** that presents the image **402** of the pedestrian, an image **406** of the cross walk, and a symbol **408** representing that the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to yield.

In another example, the intention communication subsystem **204** can display an image of an external observer next to a check mark, such as a green check mark. This would signal to the external observer that the autonomous vehicle **200** has recognized a command issued by the external observer. The command can be visual, auditory, or radio frequency. This command can originate from a traffic officer instructing the autonomous vehicle **200** to proceed through an intersection or to pull to the side of the road. For example, FIG. **5** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **500** (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200**) displaying an image **502** of a traffic officer and a symbol **504** on a display **506** indicating acknowledging a command from the traffic officer, in accordance with various embodiments.

Display on Ground or Other Surface

Rather than display the above human understandable output on a surface display of the autonomous vehicle **200**, the intention communication subsystem **204** can project, via the one or more projectors **232**, the images or words on the ground or other surfaces, such as buildings or other vehicle exteriors, in proximity to the autonomous vehicle **200**. This projection can be accomplished using a laser projector or similar projector capable of producing an image viewable under daylight conditions. This projection may also use a light manipulation device, instead of a light generating device, such as an apparatus comprising one or more mirrors, one or more lenses, one or more filters, one or more diffusers, one or more diffraction grids, or any combination thereof. Such light manipulation device can harness the ambient day light to convey the human understand able output.

In addition to displaying the above information, the human understandable output can also indicate one or more

aspects of the intended course of action of the autonomous vehicle **200**, such as the intended trajectory. This trajectory can be projected in an abstracted or simplified form. For example, an arrow projected on the ground in front of the autonomous vehicle **200** conveys the intended course of action as determined by the control system **202**. The direction and shape of this arrow can be altered as needed, so that an arrow that curves to the right would indicate that the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to turn right. If the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to turn right, but not immediately, the bar portion (rectangular portion of an arrow on which the triangular portion is affixed) can be elongated. In some embodiments, the intention communication subsystem **204** can project a countdown (e.g., numeric or symbolic) of when to execute the trajectory. For example, FIG. **6**A is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **600** (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200**) projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using an arrow symbol **602**, in accordance with various embodiments.

Alternatively, the trajectory projected can be projected in an absolute form. In this form, the trajectory projected depicts the exact route that the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to follow. For example, when parking the trajectory can be displayed as a dashed line, which curves into a parking spot. For another example, FIG. **6**B is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **650** (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200**) projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using a dash line **652**, in accordance with various embodiments. For yet another example, FIG. **6**C is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **670** (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200**) projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using a pattern **672** indicating areas that the autonomous vehicle **670** will cover, in accordance with various embodiments.

Additionally, the intended trajectory projected on the ground can include an obstacle symbol, such as a notch indicating the location of a detected obstacle. For example, if the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to turn right at an intersection, but recognizes that a pedestrian is in the crosswalk, the autonomous vehicle **200** can project a right arrow on the ground with a notch cut out of the triangular portion of the arrow, to indicate that the autonomous vehicle **200** recognizes the existence of an obstacle in its trajectory. This notch can be highlighted by using another color, such as red. As the pedestrian proceeds to cross the street, the notch correspondingly moves across the arrow until the pedestrian is no longer in the trajectory. At this point, the autonomous vehicle **200** can continue to project a circle on the ground near the arrow to indicate that the autonomous vehicle **200** recognizes a nearby obstacle but that the autonomous vehicle **200** believes the obstacle to be safely outside the intended trajectory. For example, FIG. **7** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **700** (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200**) projecting its upcoming trajectory on a nearby ground surface using an arrow symbol **702** and showing an oval **704** to indicate an obstacle along the upcoming trajectory that the autonomous vehicle **700** is aware of, in accordance with various embodiments. The autonomous vehicle **700** can project with a projector **706** mounted on its top cover near the windshield.

Similar to displaying a notch, the intended trajectory projected on the ground can include an "anti-trajectory" or exclusion zones that the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to avoid. In one example, the anti-trajectory is based on the predicted motion of detected obstacles, such as if the autonomous vehicle **200** detects a pedestrian, via the sensors **210**, standing on the corner waiting to cross the street, a large red line can be projected across the path of the autonomous vehicle **200** to indicate that the autonomous vehicle **200** will not proceed forward until the pedestrian crosses the street. For example, FIG. **8** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **800** (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200**) projecting an image **802** of a bar indicating a border beyond which the autonomous vehicle **800** would not traverse, in accordance with various embodiments. Alternatively the autonomous vehicle **200** when turning left can project a green left arrow with a red line above the arrow indicating that the vehicle will not travel straight through the intersection.

The trajectory projected on the ground can only display a limited amount of information due to limitations inherent in projecting on the ground. To make the most of the available projection area the information projected can be limited based on time or distance. For example, only the trajectory information for the next three seconds is displayed on the ground. The parameter of this time limitation may be configurable through the configuration interface **206**. Alternatively, the trajectory information for the next **100** feet is displayed on the ground. The parameter of this distance limitation may be configurable through the configuration interface **206**.

The intended trajectory can also be projected as a pattern. The pattern is comprised of both solid and void portions, such as a Crosshatch pattern. The void portions have no light projected on them. This allows for overlapping trajectories to be detected. For example, if the autonomous vehicle **200** is present at each of the entrances to a four way intersection, the center of the resulting overlapping trajectories projected on the ground will be nearly solid at the center of the intersection. As a result, the "solidness" of the pattern projected on the ground can be used to determine the number of autonomous vehicles which are expected to traverse a particular location. Similarly, the increased intensity of the light would also denote that multiple vehicles are expected to traverse a particular location. In various embodiments, the autonomous vehicles can communicate with each other using non-human understandable communication, such as radio frequency communication via the RF antennas **222**.

Movement State Indicator

The autonomous vehicle **200** can also convey its intentions using a movement state indicator, such as a three color indicator. Any three colors can be used, but the common scheme of green, yellow, and red lights may be the most easily understood. The lights can indicate any number of different things. In one embodiment, the green light indicates that the autonomous vehicle **200** is operating normally and does not detect any dangers. The yellow light indicates that the autonomous vehicle **200** is still operating but detects nearby obstacles which may be causing the autonomous vehicle **200** to operate more slowly or erratically. Finally, the red light indicates that an obstacle or event is preventing the autonomous vehicle **200** from proceeding at all. This three color indicator may be an object mounted to the autonomous vehicle **200**, or alternatively the indicator may be incorporated in the image projected on the ground in proximity to the autonomous vehicle **200**. For example, FIG. **9** is an illustration of an autonomous vehicle **900** (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200**) with a state indicator **902** to convey a human readable output corresponding to an intended course of action, in accordance with various embodiments.

Anthropomorphic Device

In another embodiment, the autonomous vehicle **200** conveys its intentions using an anthropomorphic device.

This anthropomorphic device conveys intentions using actions, motions, or gestures that are similar to those that a human would perform.

This anthropomorphic device may be a sensor pack mounted in the location normally occupied by one of the rear view mirrors in a conventional vehicle. The anthropomorphic device has a pan and tilt head that is used to convey the intentions of the autonomous vehicle **200** to external observers by panning and tilting in the direction that the autonomous vehicle **200** intends to travel. For example, when stopped at an intersection, the anthropomorphic device can pan to "look" right to convey an intention to turn right. Similarly, the anthropomorphic device can pan from left to right when stopped at an intersection to convey an impression that the autonomous vehicle **200** is checking for crossing traffic. At freeway speeds, the anthropomorphic device can pan to the right to convey the control system **202**'s intention to merge to the right.

In some embodiments, the anthropomorphic device implements a cartoon hand. For example, the cartoon hand can be a mechanically actuated device. For another example, one of the output devices **230** may be used to project or display the cartoon hand on a surface on the autonomous vehicle **200**. Alternatively, one of the output devices **230** may be used to project the cartoon hand on the ground in proximity to the autonomous vehicle **200**. The cartoon hand can be used to convey instructions to external observers. For example, at a four way stop, the autonomous vehicle **200** can signal another vehicle to proceed through the intersection by projecting a waving hand on the windshield of the autonomous vehicle **200**, in a manner similar to a human waving another driver through the intersection. The cartoon hand can also point to specific obstacles to acknowledge the existence of the obstacle. The intention communication subsystem **204** can also signify the receipt of a command from an external observer by displaying the thumbs up sign.

In other embodiments, the anthropomorphic device implements an animated face with eyes. The intention communication subsystem **204** can implement the face using one of the output devices **230**. The face can be projected or displayed on a surface of the autonomous vehicle **200** or on the ground in proximity to the autonomous vehicle **200**. The face can convey the intended travel direction (according to the control system **202**) of the autonomous vehicle **200** by moving the eyes in the direction of the anticipated travel.

External Observer Confirmation

In some instances, the autonomous vehicle **200** will need to request and confirm the attention of an external observer. This can be necessary because the autonomous vehicle **200** requires assistance from the external observer or the autonomous vehicle **200** wants to ensure that the external observer is aware of the existence of the autonomous vehicle **200**. To achieve this, the autonomous vehicle **200** first performs a notification step to attract the attention of an external observer. This notification step is performed using an attention getting device (e.g., one of the output devices **230**).

In one embodiment, the attention getting device is a notification displayed on the ground in proximity to the autonomous vehicle **200**. For example, the autonomous vehicle **200** can project a bright red flashing light on the ground around the autonomous vehicle **200**. In another embodiment, the autonomous vehicle **200** can use an outward projecting light to gain the attention of external observers by projecting a light towards the face of an external observer. The intention communication subsystem **204** can analyze the sensor data to confirm that the particular external observer is paying attention to the autonomous vehicle **200**.

After gaining the external observer's attention, the autonomous vehicle **200** then conveys and presents the human understandable output, and can request that an action be taken by an external observer in response thereto. For example, the intention communication subsystem **204** can ask an external observer to stand on the sidewalk by displaying a written command on the exterior of the windscreen such as "Please step onto the sidewalk."

The notification may not always be directed at a particular observer or require a response from an external observer. For example, the output devices **230** can include a light bar on its roof similar to those used by taxi cabs that can be used to indicate a specific aspect of the autonomous vehicle **200**. In one example, this light bar indicates that the autonomous vehicle **200** is in a convoy. This indication is necessary for the safety of non-autonomous vehicles that may be traveling on the same roadway as the convoy. Without the notification, non-autonomous vehicles may attempt to merge into the convoy. In another example, the light bar can be used to notify nearby semi-autonomous vehicles that the autonomous vehicle **200** desires to enter into a convoy, thus enabling other drivers to navigate into position to form a convoy.

Embedded Data

In each of the above examples, the intention communication subsystem **204** presents a human understandable output. In some embodiments, the human understandable output also encodes a machine readable component. For example, the state indicator described above can strobe its light at a high rate, above 16 hertz, that is imperceptible to humans to encode machine readable information. A specialized sensor is capable of discerning the embedded information. This specialized sensor can be contained within a handheld device, such as a tablet or smartphone, that can be used to display the additional information to the user. A traffic officer or other roadway manager can use such a device to influence, direct, or communicate with the autonomous vehicle **200**. In some embodiments, the specialized sensor is embedded in other autonomous vehicles, allowing that autonomous vehicle **200** to receive the information. This embedded information can contain additional details concerning the autonomous vehicle **200**'s trajectory, state, or intentions.

At least some of the components and/or modules associated with the autonomous vehicle **200** can be implemented in the form of special-purpose circuitry, or in the form of one or more appropriately programmed programmable processors, or a combination thereof. For example, the modules described can be implemented as instructions on a tangible storage memory capable of being executed by a processor or a control circuitry. The tangible storage memory may be volatile or non-volatile memory. In some embodiments, the volatile memory may be considered "non-transitory" in the sense that it is not transitory signal. Modules may be operable when executed by a processor or other computing device, e.g., a single board chip, application specific integrated circuit, a field programmable gate array, a wireless network capable computing device, or any combination thereof.

Each of the modules and/or components may operate individually and independently of other modules or components. Some or all of the modules may be executed on the same host device or on separate devices. The separate devices can be coupled together through one or more communication channels (e.g., wireless or wired channel) to

coordinate their operations. Some or all of the components and/or modules may be combined as one component or module.

A single component or module may be divided into sub-modules or sub-components, each sub-module or sub-component performing separate method step or method steps of the single module or component. In some embodiments, at least some of the modules and/or components share access to a memory space. For example, one module or component may access data accessed by or transformed by another module or component. The modules or components may be considered "coupled" to one another if they share a physical connection or a virtual connection, directly or indirectly, allowing data accessed or modified from one module or component to be accessed in another module or component. In some embodiments, at least some of the modules can be upgraded or modified remotely. The autonomous vehicle **200** may include additional, fewer, or different modules for various applications.

FIG. **10** is a flow chart of a method **1000** of operating an autonomous vehicle (e.g., the autonomous vehicle **200** of FIG. **2**) to convey an intended course of action to an external observer, in accordance with various embodiments. The autonomous vehicle can be driven by a control system (e.g., the control system **202** of FIG. **2**). The method **1000** includes the control system receiving a task (e.g., a navigation task) for the autonomous vehicle at step **1002**. For example, the task can be to drive to a particular destination, to undertake a goal that requires movement (e.g., to pick up trash, to obtain fuel, to join a convoy), to secure the autonomous vehicle (e.g., to lock the door or start an alarm under certain circumstances, etc.), to influence the autonomous vehicle's environment (e.g., to request removal of an obstacle in the surround environment or to request assistance in refueling), or other vehicle-related, location-based, or navigation-related tasks.

At step **1004**, the control system collects data that characterizes a surrounding environment of the autonomous vehicle using a sensor (or multiple sensors, such as the sensors **210** of FIG. **2**) coupled to the control system. Data is collected in real-time while the autonomous vehicle is operative (e.g., both when moving and when stationary). At step **1006**, the control system determines an intended course of action to drive the autonomous vehicle utilizing the control system based on the task assigned to the control system and the collected data related to the surrounding environment.

At step **1008**, the control system or an intention communication system (e.g., the intention communication subsystem **204** of FIG. **2**) detects an object in the surrounding environment and a characteristic of the object based on the collected data from the sensor. For example, step **1008** can include detecting presence of an external observer or an obstacle based on the collected data. Step **1008** can include detecting a location of the external observer or the obstacle relative to the location of the autonomous vehicle.

At step **1010**, the control system produces an attention grabbing effect via a first output device to notify the external observer (e.g., either a specific external observer detected in step **1008** or any external observer in proximity to the autonomous vehicle) of an intent to convey a message. For example, producing the attention grabbing effect can include displaying a notification on a ground surface in proximity to the autonomous vehicle. The attention grabbing effect can be produced by a light manipulation apparatus or a light producing apparatus. In some embodiments, step **1008** includes detecting a face of the external observer based on the collected data. Step **1010** can then include producing the attention grabbing effect by projecting light towards a direction corresponding to the detected face of the external observer.

At step **1012**, the intention communication system conveys a human understandable output (e.g., as the intended message) via a second output device (e.g., one of the output devices **230** of FIG. **2**). In some embodiments, the second output device has more than two states, unlike a conventional turn signal or brake light. The first output device can be the same or different from the second output device. The human understandable output indicates the intended course of action of the autonomous vehicle to the external observer.

Conveying the human understandable output can include targeting the human understandable output at a detected location of the external observer utilizing the second output device that is directional. Conveying the human understandable output can include conveying any of a standardized transportation symbol, a human language word, or an image on a display of the autonomous vehicle. The image can be an image of the external observer. For example, step **1008** can optionally include the control system detecting a gesture-based command from the external observer to the autonomous vehicle based on the collected data (e.g., by running a gesture detecting process on video or photographs of the surrounding environment). The image of the external observer (as the issuer of the gesture-based command) can be used to convey an acknowledgement of the receipt and approval of the gesture-based command. Conveying the human understandable output can also include conveying using a sound producing apparatus with a sound clip as the human understandable output or projecting the human understandable output via a projector to a ground surface in proximity to the autonomous vehicle.

In some embodiments, step **1006** can include determining to make a request the external observer. In that case, step **1012** can include presenting the request to the external observer. The autonomous vehicle can present the request generally via at least one of its output devices or target at least one of the output devices at the specific external observer.

In some embodiments, conveying the human understandable output includes indicating that the autonomous vehicle is in a convoy. For example, step **1006** can include determining that the autonomous vehicle is to enter into a convoy; and step **1012** can include indicating, via the human understandable output, that the autonomous vehicle is waiting for or ready to enter into the convoy.

Step **1008** can optionally include the control system detecting a potential obstacle in proximity to the autonomous vehicle. The potential obstacle can be the external observer, who is located in substantial proximity to a trajectory of the autonomous vehicle, based on the collected data that characterizes the surrounding environment.

In various embodiments, step **1012** includes indicating one or more aspects of the intended course of action via the human understandable output. For example, the aspects can include an intended trajectory of the autonomous vehicle or a location of a potential or detected obstacle. The intended trajectory can be presented as an arrow, a dash line, or some other pattern. For example, the intention communication system can determine an extent (e.g., length of the arrow or the dashed line) of the intended trajectory based on a predetermine time interval. The intended trajectory can be indicated using a laser or a projector. The pattern of the intended trajectory can include voids such that, when mul-

tiple vehicles project onto a same location, a resulting pattern of overlapping projections has fewer or smaller voids.

For another example, the aspects can include an avoidance area that the autonomous vehicle intends to avoid. The avoidance area can be determine in step **1006**. For example, determining the intended course of action can include detecting an obstacle based on the collected data and determining the avoidance area by estimating a predicated motion of the detected obstacle.

In some embodiments, the second output device is an anthropomorphic device configured to convey the human understandable output. The anthropomorphic device can be a mechanically actuated device (e.g., the mechanically actuated devices **240** of FIG. **2**). For example, the anthropomorphic device can be a sensor pack mounted in a location normally occupied by a rear view mirror in a conventional automobile. The anthropomorphic device can be a camera capable of pan, tilt, and zoom. The anthropomorphic device can be a cartoon hand.

The anthropomorphic device can be a display (e.g., one of the display devices **234**) or a projector (e.g., one of the projectors **232**) emulating a person or part of a person (e.g., by animating a face). The animated face can include animated eyes. The anthropomorphic device can also present an animation of any other body parts, including a hand or a head. For example, the anthropomorphic device can be configured to perform a gesture as the human understandable output. The gesture, for example, can indicate that the autonomous vehicle recognizes an obstacle or that the autonomous vehicle acknowledges a command (e.g., the gesture-based command) received from the external observer. The gesture can also indicate an intended direction of travel as determined by the control system.

In some embodiments, the human understandable output is a state indicator (e.g., a three color state indicator). The state indicate can indicate movement or navigation state of the control system. For example, the human understandable output is selected from one of three possible states, such as red for stopping, green for moving normally, and yellow for moving slowly. The state indicator can be produced by a light producing device or a projector. The state indicator can be presented on the autonomous vehicle or on a ground surface in proximity to the autonomous vehicle (e.g., by projection). The state indicator can take the form of a line indicating that the autonomous vehicle will not cross the line.

In some embodiments, conveying the human understandable output also includes embedding machine readable information in the human understandable output. The machine readable information can convey additional information beyond which is apparent to a human observer. The intention communication system can embed the machine readable information by pulse-coding the human understandable output. This machine readable information is useful to provide additional information to a mobile device of an external observer. This machine readable information is also useful in helping observers with disabilities. For example, blind pedestrians can use an electronic cane. The electronic cane can convert the machine readable information to audio information or tactile information.

In some embodiments, step **1008** can include detecting external observers with disabilities, such as by detecting presence of a white cane for visually impaired persons. In step **1012**, the intention communication system can select the form of the human understandable output to better serve an external observer with a detected disability.

While processes or blocks are presented in a given order, alternative embodiments may perform routines having steps, or employ systems having blocks, in a different order, and some processes or blocks may be deleted, moved, added, subdivided, combined, and/or modified to provide alternative or subcombinations. Each of these processes or blocks may be implemented in a variety of different ways. Also, while processes or blocks are at times shown as being performed in series, these processes or blocks may instead be performed in parallel, or may be performed at different times.

FIG. **11** is a block schematic diagram that depicts a machine in the exemplary form of a computer system **1100**, within which a set of instructions for causing the machine to perform any of the herein disclosed methodologies (e.g., FIG. **10**) may be executed. For example, the control system **202** or the intention communication subsystem **204** of FIG. **2** can be the computer system **1100**. In some embodiments, the computer system **1100** may include a network router, a network switch, a network bridge, personal digital assistant (PDA), a cellular telephone, a Web appliance or any machine capable of executing or transmitting a sequence of instructions that specify actions to be taken. The computer system **1100** is intended to illustrate a hardware device on which any of the instructions, processes, modules and components depicted in the figures above (and any other processes, techniques, modules and/or components described in this specification) can be implemented. As shown, the computer system **1100** includes a processor **1102**, memory **1104**, non-volatile memory **1106**, and a network interface **1108**. Various common components (e.g., cache memory) are omitted for illustrative simplicity. The computer system **1100** can be of any applicable known or convenient type, e.g., a personal computer (PC), server-class computer or mobile device (e.g., smartphone, card reader, tablet computer, etc.). The components of the computer system **1100** can be coupled together via a bus and/or through any other known or convenient form(s) of interconnects).

One of ordinary skill in the relevant art will recognize that the terms "machine-readable (storage) medium" or "computer-readable (storage) medium" include any type of device that is accessible by the processor **1102**. The memory **1104** is coupled to the processor **1102** by, for example, a bus **1110**. The memory **1104** can include, by way of example but not limitation, random access memory (RAM), e.g., dynamic RAM (DRAM) and static RAM (SRAM). The memory **1104** can be local, remote, or distributed.

The bus **1110** also couples the processor **1102** to the non-volatile memory **1106** and drive unit **1112**. The non-volatile memory **1106** may be a hard disk, a magnetic-optical disk, an optical disk, a read-only memory (ROM), e.g., a CD-ROM, Erasable Programmable Read-Only Memory (EPROM), or Electrically Erasable Programmable Read-Only Memory (EEPROM), a magnetic or optical card, or another form of storage for large amounts of data. The non-volatile memory **1106** can be local, remote, or distributed.

The data structures, modules, and instruction steps described in the figures above may be stored in the non-volatile memory **1106**, the drive unit **1112**, or the memory **1104**. The processor **1102** may execute one or more of the modules stored in the memory components.

The bus **1110** also couples the processor **1102** to the network interface **1108**. The network interface **1108** can include one or more of a modem or network interface. A modem or network interface can be considered to be part of the computer system **1100**. The network interface **1108** can

include an Ethernet card, a Bluetooth card, an optical fiber interface, a cable modem, a token ring interface, or other interfaces for coupling a computer system to other computer systems.

It is to be understood that embodiments may be used as or to support software programs or software modules executed upon some form of processing core (e.g., the CPU of a computer) or otherwise implemented or realized upon or within a machine or computer readable medium. A machine-readable medium includes any mechanism for storing or transmitting information in a form readable by a machine, e.g., a computer. For example, a machine readable medium includes read-only memory (ROM); random access memory (RAM); magnetic disk storage media; optical storage media; flash memory devices; electrical, optical, acoustical or other form of propagated signals, for example, carrier waves, infrared signals, digital signals, etc.; or any other type of media suitable for storing or transmitting information.

Some embodiments of the disclosure have other aspects, elements, features, and steps in addition to or in place of what is described above. These potential additions and replacements are described throughout the rest of the specification.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for an autonomous vehicle to communicate with external observers, comprising:

receiving a task at the autonomous vehicle;

collecting data that characterizes a surrounding environment of the autonomous vehicle from a sensor coupled to the autonomous vehicle;

determining an intended course of action for the autonomous vehicle to undertake based on the task and the collected data;

projecting a human understandable output, via a projector that manipulates or produces light, to a ground surface in proximity to the autonomous vehicle; and

wherein the human understandable output indicates the intended course of action of the autonomous vehicle to an external observer; and

wherein the autonomous vehicle confirms recognition of the external observer by presenting, via the projector, an image of the external observer.

2. The method of claim **1**, wherein projecting the human understandable output includes indicating an intended trajectory of the autonomous vehicle.

3. The method of claim **2**, further comprising detecting a location of a potential obstacle from the collected data; and wherein the intended trajectory includes a notch that indicates the detected location of the potential obstacle.

4. The method of claim **2**, wherein indicating the intended trajectory includes displaying an extent of the intended trajectory based on a predetermined time interval.

5. The method of claim **2**, wherein the intended trajectory is indicated using a laser.

6. The method of claim **2**, wherein indicating the intended trajectory includes projecting the intended trajectory as a pattern.

7. The method of claim **6**, wherein the pattern includes voids such that, when multiple vehicles project onto a same location, a resulting pattern of overlapping projections has fewer or smaller voids.

8. The method of claim **1**, wherein projecting the human understandable output includes indicating an avoidance area that the autonomous vehicle intends to avoid.

9. The method of claim **8**, wherein determining the intended course of action includes:

detecting an obstacle based on the collected data; and

determining the avoidance area by estimating a predicted motion of the detected obstacle.

10. A vehicle comprising:

a control system with electronic circuitry configured to enable the vehicle to complete a task autonomously or semi-autonomously;

a sensor, coupled to the control system, configured to collect data related to a surrounding environment of the vehicle;

wherein the control system is configured to determine an intended course of action for the vehicle based on the task and the collected data; and

an anthropomorphic device, coupled to the control system, configured to convey a human understandable output regarding the intended course of action to an external observer,

wherein the vehicle confirms recognition of the external observer by presenting, via the anthropomorphic device, an image of the external observer.

11. The vehicle of claim **10**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is configured to move in a pattern or a human understandable gesture to convey the human understandable output.

12. The vehicle of claim **11**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is a sensor pack mounted over an area between a driver seat and a passenger seat.

13. The vehicle of claim **12**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is a camera capable of pan, tilt, and zoom.

14. The vehicle of claim **10**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is an actuated hand or a display device configured to animate a cartoon hand.

15. The vehicle of claim **10**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is a display device configured to animate a face with eyes.

16. The vehicle of claim **10**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is configured to indicate recognition of an obstacle.

17. The vehicle of claim **10**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is configured to indicate acknowledgement of a command received from the external observer.

18. The vehicle of claim **10**, wherein the anthropomorphic device is configured to indicate an intended direction of travel of the vehicle.

19. A method for an autonomous vehicle to communicate with external observers, comprising:

receiving a task at the autonomous vehicle;

collecting data that characterizes a surrounding environment of the autonomous vehicle from a sensor coupled to the autonomous vehicle;

determining an intended course of action for the autonomous vehicle to undertake based on the task and the collected data; and

conveying a human understandable output, via an output device, wherein the human understandable output indicates the intended course of action of the autonomous vehicle to an external observer,

wherein the autonomous vehicle confirms recognition of the external observer by presenting, via the output device, an image of the external observer.

20. The method of claim **19**, further comprising detecting a location of the external observer based on the collected data; and wherein conveying the human understandable output includes targeting the human understandable output at the detected location of the external observer.

21. The method of claim 19, wherein the output device conveying the human understandable output is a sound producing apparatus.

22. The method of claim 19, wherein the output device conveying the human understandable output displays at least one of a standardized transportation symbol, a human language word, and an image on a display of the autonomous vehicle.

23. The method of claim 19, wherein the collected data that characterizes the surrounding environment includes detecting a command from the external observer to the autonomous vehicle, wherein the image of the external observer indicates acknowledgement of the command.

24. The method of claim 19, further comprising producing an attention grabbing effect via a second output device to notify the external observer of an intent to convey a message, prior to conveying the human understandable output; wherein the output device is a first output device.

25. The method of claim 24, wherein the first output device is the second output device.

26. The method of claim 24, wherein producing the attention grabbing effect includes displaying a notification on a ground surface in proximity to the autonomous vehicle.

27. The method of claim 24, further comprising detecting a location of the external observer based on the collected data; and wherein producing the attention grabbing effect includes projecting light towards a direction corresponding to the detected location of the external observer.

28. The method of claim 19, wherein determining the intended course of action includes generating a request to deliver to the external observer; and wherein conveying the human understandable output includes presenting the request to the external observer.

29. The method of claim 19, wherein conveying the human understandable output includes indicating that the autonomous vehicle is in a convoy.

30. The method of claim 19, wherein determining the intended course of action includes determining that the autonomous vehicle is to enter into a convoy; and wherein conveying the human understandable output includes indicating that the autonomous vehicle is waiting for or ready to enter into the convoy.

31. The method of claim 19, wherein the human understandable output is a movement state indicator.

32. The method of claim 31, wherein conveying the human understandable output includes displaying the movement state indicator on a ground surface in proximity to the autonomous vehicle.

33. The method of claim 32, wherein the movement state indicator takes a form of a line indicating that the autonomous vehicle will not cross the line.

34. The method of claim 31, wherein the movement state indicator includes a stopped state, a normal speed state, and a reduced speed state.

35. The method of claim 19, wherein conveying the human understandable output includes embedding machine readable information in the human understandable output.

36. The method of claim 35, wherein the machine readable information conveys additional information beyond that conveyed in the human understandable output.

37. The method of claim 35, wherein embedding the machine readable information includes pulse-coding the human understandable output.

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